



Wielopole on Arno—Tango

Brunella Eruli

It was November 1979. The newspapers spoke much of it: a Polish theatre director arrived in Florence to stage a performance about which no one knew anything, neither title, nor subject. The only thing noted was that the performance was to be in Polish, a language not very familiar to the majority of Florentines, at least at that time. There was curiosity. Someone registered surprise and disappointment, mourning the passing of a theatre of great names and secure profits, and commented upon this eccentricity of the young communist councilor (heretic enough to be admitted to the salons of the city aristocrats). After having seen *La Classe Morta*, he was struck down as St. Paul on the road to Damascus and decided to try everything to help Kantor realize his performance in Florence.

It was the end of the dark years. In Italy there was a war, even if it was unclear who the combatants were and what were their objectives. One perceived certain things. Even if one did not know. Not yet. We were lost, but certain of not being manipulated. Not completely at least. Everyone was certain to be right, and history, that not already decreed dead, would never have failed to give approval to everyone.

Devising an outrageous project was also a way to remain alive and intact, a way to force history to reveal its choices. We have no evidence that it did. Not the choices we expected. Not then. And on that which followed, better to remain silent.

I speak of that period, of that moment, because it seems far from the uncertainty of today, far from an indifference generated by the loss of alternatives.

Kantor in Florence, then, was also a challenge thrown at those who wished the people to have projects of fast consumption. Projects that leave no trace, that erase imagination, fervency, future, and expectation.

Nowadays, the city has been diverted from all this and has forgotten Kantor. Perhaps. Perhaps the city still does not know that she was infected by him in a way which only time will show. To see this, one will need much patience. A stranger to herself, sad and everyday more and more obtuse by her own wealth, the city cooperates in her own disintegration, in the crumbling of her past identity and therefore her future identity. The 'Goldoni' theatre in Via St. Maria, Gordon Craig's theatre, which was promised to Kantor for his debut in Florence, has finally been restored. Too late. Nobody uses it because running costs are exorbitant. The recession becomes another good excuse to stage performances without any risk. Without any courage.

The first time I saw Kantor in person, not his character on the stage, was November 1979, the day of his arrival in Florence, at St. Maria Oltrarno, a desecrated church which had been used as a warehouse in the local area of

artisans. Now, it is one of the most intellectual and chic areas of the town—one eats macrobiotic food. Drug addicts have been hidden elsewhere, not to disturb the tourists. A tramp, whom everyone used to feed and wish good morning to, was found dead. She used to write, squatting on the pavement, a mysterious series of numbers. Fortunately, you can still find Torquato, the greengrocer who offers sprouts, spinach, and salad from his own garden as if his customers were the members of his family. Since a book of his recipes was published in the USA, Torquato has become a new person—now he has a part to play. Nowadays, his son is at the store as well. Like the father, he also has a part to play. They repeat the same script daily. Kantor would have liked that. The window cleaners—Polish or Bosnian—despite their individual disasters, are synchronized with the city's street lights: gentle Charons of an urban inferno invisible to the indifferent and ignorant conformists who look straight ahead, locked in their own cars, seeing nothing and sticking their fingers up their noses. Kantor would have liked that. Smiling Africans go through the city selling lighters when the weather is good and umbrellas when it rains, but they always play hide and seek with the police who pretend to believe in their passports. The Chinese, closed in their workshops producing "Florentine" artifacts, are not seen. No virgin weeps in this city. The city is ever more rich and stupid.

When I arrived at St. Maria, I saw a thin man, not very tall, dressed in black, with a velvet beret pulled over his eyes and an incredibly long scarf wrapped around his neck. A mobile visage. An anxious regard. The hands crossed behind his back were moving like the wings of a bird caught in a cage. He was talking with others in a twittering language which would become strangely familiar to me, to the point where I had the impression that I sometimes understood what was being said. A group of young people, maybe old (my God, these people all look the same!) was keeping an eye on a truck smashed, rather than parked, against the pavement of a very narrow lane. All the traffic was blocked. Shopkeepers standing at their doors, hands on hips, were commenting on the maneuvers without lifting a finger. The truck was regurgitating large crates on which were written incomprehensible words. The church door stood ajar, but the crates remained in the street as if they were uncertain whether to enter or return to Kraków. Kantor was agitated: they told him that the space was ready to welcome actors and objects. Everything was supposed to be done; whereas, on the contrary, it had yet to be done. Heaven and earth and some notable persons were accused of being responsible for not cooperating.

Outside, in the street, there was noise, confusion, and restlessness. From inside, careless of its own decay and flooded with all types of objects, the relics from other wreckage, the clear and secure space of the church was breathing autumn light.

The man from dark Kraków brought with him the other face of the Renaissance: contortions and pains of an apocalyptic inferno. That was the content of the crates. And maybe because of what was in the crates, there seemed to be no place for these people and for their apocalyptic inferno within the

church, built in grey sandstone, washed in lime, whose golden dimensions ignored history and its horrors. Perhaps it disdained them. Maybe it had forgotten them now.

Like one of his characters, Kantor took with him a somber burden never relinquished. How could he have lived without it? How would he have been aware of existing without it? Little by little, with the passing of time, weeks then months then years, the burden was consumed,

melting into slow tears:

a thread then a stream a shower

then a desperate flood

running into the river

brought about by its own momentum

it laps ponds swamps bogs stones

sand and finally slides into the sea.

Ascending the currents it finds again cold water

sweet and familiar

and ashes which once were plants.

Under the cold light of the moon which fixes with the same light

the holy places of all dead

in Wielopole the chosen and the saved

pull up from the surf

cries and laughter

bridal veils, military uniforms, guns, hats, chasubles, crosses, war sounds,

violence, pianola, sweet Christmas carols, the touching simplicity of the spirits

and its obtuse arrogance.

Pulsating as a rescued heart which restarts to beat,

the burden is ready to run

-backwards-

on its new path

oblique, twisted, unknown and frightening

to talk of the places of rage

of the violence of the compassion and of the irony.

The lost places of memory, the found places of nostalgia

incurable presence, tenacious distances.

Please, conductor, a tango for

Wielopole—Wielopole

Wielopole—on Arno.

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